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Class _____

Book 181



THE LESSON OF THE HOUR.

WHAT times are these in which we live ! What tragedies are we compelled to witness ! The President of a free people assassinated in his own capitol ! A conspiracy to murder the chief rulers of the nation, and thus paralyze or destroy the Government ! Our flag, that so lately waved joyfully in the breeze, now draped in mourning ; our bells, that rang out pæans of victory, tolling for sorrow ; our nation in tears, that but yesterday was jubilant and triumphing ! In what age, in what country, do we live, that such catastrophes are realities ! If the sun had been turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, the horror would scarcely have been more dreadful. Passion Week is henceforth to be doubly significant as commemorative of a nation's agony, and Good Friday will be shrouded in a deeper gloom from association with the slaughter of the most beloved of magistrates. It is a personal as well as a public loss. It is a stab at every loyal heart, as well as at the cause of order, civilization, and liberty. God speaks to us by such events ; and it becomes us to listen to the teachings of his providence, as well as to his written word.

The first impression that is made upon us, after we have recovered from the shock which well-nigh overwhelmed us, is the feeling of mingled astonishment and shame at the baseness and enormity of the crime. We see of what wickedness man is capable. Human nature seems disgraced. The principal villain was not an ignorant, but a cultivated man. He had no personal provocation. The object of his dastardly

and deadly aim was the representative and instrument of the people, who had given the least cause for the assault. If such a deed had been perpetrated under a despotism, during the dark ages, we might not have wondered. But that it should have occurred here, in this nineteenth century after Christ, in this enlightened land, under the most liberal form of government, at the hand of one intelligent, refined apparently, and even accomplished, proves the iniquity which man may commit, and the inadequacy of mere culture to prevent it. Education, indeed, only enables the criminal to be more artful and more successful. The arch-fiend himself has consummate power and intellect. It is the moral sentiments alone that control the will and the life. As man may rise in the scale till he reach the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ, so he may sink till he approximates the devils. The character of Judas is now less difficult to understand. He was only a betrayer, not a murderer. Here, however, was a parricide as well as a traitor.

“ Murder most foul, as in the best it is ;
But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.”

It was an attempt at the life of the nation in the person of its Chief Magistrate. On the very day upon which our flag was replaced at Sumter as the symbol of the national authority, the head of the nation was struck down in Washington. It is a matter of humiliation as well as sorrow for us as a people. Those who hold their power by force against the will of their subjects now seem to say to us, “ Art thou also become weak as we ? Art thou become like unto us ? ” We never believed it possible that the spirit of assassination could exist among us, since we publicly declared, that rulers derive all their authority from the consent of the governed. We can hardly hear with patience of the deification of human nature ; that men are all embryo saints ; that sin is only stumbling, necessary to man’s development, and deserving only of pity, but not of punishment. As this war has for ever silenced the advocates of peace, so let us hope that we shall hear no more of views which represent the criminal as merely

unfortunate, and the assassin as only a less fully developed Christian.

If we turn now to contemplate our great loss, we cannot but admire and bless that signal Providence which selected one who was the son of a "poor white" in a slave State, and who grew up in a log-cabin in a Western wilderness, to be the ruler of this great nation in the most critical period of its history. Abraham Lincoln was pre-eminently the product of our institutions. Not graceful or refined, not always using the English language correctly, so that he did not receive a degree from Harvard College, he has proved to be the very man for the times; and he has won a place in the opinion of foreign critics and in the esteem of his countrymen, which is second only to that of Washington. He had the greatness of goodness; not a powerful or a brilliant intellect, but plain, practical good sense, a sincere purpose to do right, an eminently catholic spirit that was ready to listen to all sides, and a firm, unshaken belief in the expediency of justice. He believed in God, and in the victory of truth and righteousness. And when so many of our distinguished men have employed their talents to defend iniquity and to bolster up injustice, when so many of our presidents have encouraged corruption and intrigues, both at home and abroad, it was most auspicious that we had in the chair of state one whose honesty was unquestionable, and whose patriotism was above all doubt. Hence he proved such a skilful pilot, because he pursued so straight a course; no man who ever wielded such power having had so few enemies. Considering that his life was menaced before he was inaugurated, and that he was constantly in peril, it is wonderful that he was spared so long. But his work is done. He lived to restore the old flag to the spot where it had been stricken down, and to tread the streets of the conquered capital. He has now gone to join the great army of which he was the commander-in-chief, who have laid down their lives for the country, and with whom he will ever be associated as the chief martyr. Providence did not permit him to rebuild the temple of our liberties; but he was enabled to lay its foundations, to see its outlines and its glori-

ous proportions, and to behold all nations and races worshipping in it. No greater treasure could be left to us than the legacy of his services and his example.

It is impossible that one man could have concocted, matured, and executed such a crime. There was a cause behind, and this act was only the "crest of the wave." To those who are familiar with the society of the South, this deed did not occasion surprise. Opinions and practices prevail there, which are in perfect harmony with this atrocity. Founded on a system of injustice which abrogates all natural rights and all personal relations, which denies liberty, marriage, knowledge even of the Bible, murder is rife there as the natural concomitant of ignorance, concubinage, and barbarism. Slavery corrupts the conscience, and relaxes the entire moral law. Deeds of violence are permitted and prompted by it; and it is within the remembrance of all of us, that Southern senators in the Congress of the United States have publicly threatened to hang Northern men, if only they could arrest them. The same fiendish spirit which massacred our wounded soldiers, which starved our prisoners, which endeavored to burn the women and children in the hotels of a great city, renders a deed like this neither impossible nor improbable. And when we know that it was declared by many at the South that Mr. Lincoln would never live to be inaugurated; when we know that a million of dollars was asked for in their public prints as the price for the assassination of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary of State,—we are compelled to find here the instigating cause of the murder. The assassin says in his letter: "My love is for the South alone. This country was formed for the white, not for the black, man. African slavery is one of the greatest blessings God ever bestowed upon a favored nation."

The author of this diabolical act was not a rebel, but a confederate with rebels; and his deed is the result of sympathy with treason. A Northern sympathizer with the enemy is far baser than a Southern foe. Not daring openly to take up arms against the Government, he opposes it by every means in his power. We all know in what quarters praise has been given

to the insurgents, false charges have been preferred against the Government, hatred has been enkindled against the blacks, and the prediction made, that, if war broke out between the North and South, it would be carried on also in our own cities and towns. These declarations have tended to embarrass our cause, to weaken the Government, to sow dissensions at home, to strengthen our enemies abroad, to encourage the South, and to create that state of disaffection which has now ripened into malicious murder. They who by their words have helped to make that public sentiment which has now manifested itself in act are morally participants in the guilt of it. "He that biddeth him God-speed is partaker of his evil deeds." Because treason involves such prodigious crimes, because this rebellion is so gigantic, we do not perhaps regard it with the abhorrence which it deserves. Villany often makes men bold and desperate. But robbery and murder are not excusable because they are committed by many rather than by few, by States rather than by individuals. One might perhaps find even in Satan some qualities to admire. The enemy of the country is far more to be loathed than a personal enemy. Jefferson Davis is a far greater criminal than Booth, because a nation was his victim, and he has sacrificed thousands of lives. The republic is in a life or death struggle. Public sentiment is our only safeguard. To praise the enemy is to assist them. On this account, men should be held to a strict responsibility for their expressions. These may incite others to overt acts of treason. The North is full of persons of doubtful loyalty. The subtle poison instilled by slavery is still lurking in all its parts. It is well known that many of the friends of Edward Everett regretted his patriotic course. The assassin of the President has friends in Boston, and doubtless a large number of accomplices throughout the country. There are many persons of wealth and influence who have no word of condemnation for the rebellion. Such persons are unworthy to live in a free country. Sympathy with treason is more dangerous than open rebellion. If allowed to pass unrebuked, no one is safe, and civil war may at any time break out in our streets. We

must have a public opinion which shall not allow even the utterance of disloyal sentiments. Let those who hold them, whether they be foreigners or natives, be compelled to silence; or, if they speak, let them be shunned as the enemies of their country and of their race. If one can talk of this recent tragedy with any feeling but that of abhorrence for the actors in it, and for the spirit that prompted it, let him be excluded from society, and avoided as one who is in league with the powers of wickedness.

In our treatment of the rebels, we must be careful not to give way to the spirit of revenge. There is a tone of haughtiness and contempt which is but little different from that used by the Southerners themselves. Sarcasm, malice, hate, are not justifiable even in a good cause. If we punish a boy, we should not taunt him. There should be righteous indignation, but not unrighteous and unchristian resentment and wrath. There should not be vengeance, but justice; a complete vindication of the right, and an utter extirpation of the wrong. There must be a distinction made between the leaders and the people. The latter are to live with us, and must be conciliated and civilized. The former, who knowingly and wilfully have plotted and achieved all this mischief, must receive no forbearance or indulgence. They have been guilty of the greatest offence known to the law. They have sought the ruin of the nation. It is not safe that they should be permitted to live among us, to destroy our peace and injure our prosperity. We owe it to posterity that treason shall be regarded and punished as the most heinous of crimes. These incendiaries have no claims upon us, no rights which we are bound to respect. They are vipers which must be crushed, else they will sting the hand that would nurse and feed them. Their spirit is inexorable and implacable. Their civil ruler declares, that the war shall be continued, that he will never abandon the work, that no peace shall be made, that again and again will he renew and maintain the contest. Their military leader, in his farewell to his defeated soldiers, expresses his increasing admiration of their constancy and devotion to the Confederacy, and says, "You will take with

you the satisfaction that proceeds from the consciousness of duty faithfully performed." The Southern correspondent of the London Times writes, "If Richmond falls, and Lee and Johnston are driven from the field, it is but the first stage of the colossal revolution which will be completed. The closing scenes of this mightiest of revolutionary dramas will not be played out, save in the times of our children's children." No toleration must be extended to men who continue to avow such sentiments. The theory of State sovereignty must be for ever annihilated. The curse of slavery must be for ever extirpated. They who take the sword must abide the appeal to the sword. This even-handed justice must —

"Commend the ingredients of their poisoned chalice
To their own lips."

We must have hereafter a stronger government, which can deal with the elements of treason and rebellion. There must also be more respect paid to our rulers, and more confidence reposed in them. Party opposition has been carried altogether too far. Prejudice and political feeling have, in some persons, well-nigh extinguished patriotism. We find fault with every act which does not accord with our views or policy. We do not recognize Government as the expression of Right, and obedience as a sacred duty. We do not appreciate our great men until they are taken from us. All persons now unite to honor the President when dead, who would not praise him if he were living. What a sad commentary is this on our injustice and ingratitude to public men! Mr. Lincoln is a striking instance of the unreasonableness and unfairness of political opponents. He was blamed by both extremes. Let us see to it that his successor is better supported.

In this country where the people rule, every citizen has a duty to perform. The State requires his allegiance and his service. Especially should the intelligent and religious portion of the community feel under solemn obligation to give their influence in the nomination and election of wise and virtuous rulers, in the support of all measures of sound public policy, and in the maintenance and increase of all use-

ful institutions. The republic cannot spare the voice or vote of any of her good citizens. And yet a few persons control our elections, nominate our officers, superintend our public interests, and watch over the public good! The withdrawal, one after another, of our prominent men, imposes an added responsibility on those who remain. When there are so many materials of discord in the State, every one should exert himself to maintain order, liberty, and progress. A few reckless individuals can cause incalculable injury to the community. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance. The organs of public sentiment must be true. The tone of public debate must be candid. The spirit of public assemblies must be loyal and firm. The best tribute which we can pay to the memory of our great chief is increased fidelity to the principles which he represented. If his course commands our admiration, it should also incite us to imitation.

We have many reasons for hope and encouragement as to our country. We have cause for gratitude, that, with all the hostile elements among us, we have escaped the outbreak of civil war at the North. We have cause for thanksgiving, that our people have showed themselves so devoted and brave; bearing cheerfully the burdens and calamities of this conflict, and resolved that it shall be closed only by a righteous and lasting peace. We have cause for praise, that, notwithstanding our great loss, we have still so many able leaders left, and that our Government is so well able to cope with its open and its secret enemies. Our land is the dearer to us for our sacrifices. The blood of our martyrs sanctifies and enriches it. Their spirit passes into thousands of hearts. How costly is the progress of the race! It is only by the giving of life that we can have life. The first period of the war is nearly closed. The military portion of the work is almost done. There remains the more difficult part, that of civil reconstruction. We must have faith in our fundamental ideas. We must have faith in man and in human progress. Above all, we must have faith in God, in the triumph of his truth, in the establishment of his kingdom on the earth. New glory and prosperity are in store for us, if we are only true to the

principles of that kingdom. In the wise words of our late President, let us hope that peace "will come soon, and come to stay ; and so come as to be worth keeping in all future time. It will then have been proved that among freemen there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet, and that they who take such appeal are sure to lose their cases, and pay the cost. Still, let us not be over-sanguine of a speedy, final triumph. Let us be quite sober. Let us diligently apply the means, never doubting that a just God in his own good time will give us the rightful result."

E. J. Y.

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